

MAKING PEACE WITH A SONG
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
March 16, 2008

Philippians 2:1-11

The books of the Bible that were written by the apostle Paul are given the names of churches, because that's what they are: letters to congregations. The Letter to the Church at Corinth. The Letter to the Church at Galatia. Paul didn't set out in his writings to compose grand theological works. He was writing to churches, to congregations, about specific issues in those congregations.

Congregations. We know how it goes in congregations—our own and others. It's not always grand things that occupy us. There's a leak in the kitchen that needs fixing. A Sunday school class needs new curriculum. A couple of people have gotten into a fuss over something or other. Congregations often seem to be dealing with things that are mundane and downright trivial.

Paul knew all about that sort of thing. Those seemingly trivial issues were often the very things that Paul wrote about in his letters. Yet Paul had this remarkable ability to take a trivial issue and discover the whole gospel in it. He would take something ordinary, and lift it into the realm of the holy.

“Paul, what about speaking in tongues? Are we supposed to do that or not?” The congregation at Corinth had written Paul about that. Do you know how Paul responded? Here's how? “Though I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” He takes this everyday question, and fashions his great chapter on love—I Corinthians 13.

Or the Galatians: “Paul, we think that new Christians ought to be circumcised. What do you think?” “Absolutely not!” Paul shot back. There are no distinctions: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free; all are one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul has this remarkable ability to take a local issue and find in it the gospel of Christ.

At the Greek city of Philippi, some sort of division had taken place in the congregation. It's not possible to tell exactly what the issue was. Over in chapter four of the letter to the Philippians, Paul urges "Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." It sounds like these two women were not of the same mind. What were they disagreeing about?

We did a close study of the words at Bible study the other night, and concluded it was pew cushions. That's what Euodia and Syntyche were disagreeing about, specifically the color of the pew cushions. It seems that Euodia wanted alternating black and gold cushions, while Syntyche wanted a particular shade of orange, approximately the color of Bruce Pearl's jacket, if you know that shade of orange. Things had gotten a little testy; people had been choosing up sides—the Euodia side, the Syntyche side.

So Paul writes to these two women and to the church. How is he going to appeal to them? Do you know what he does? He sings a song. People who have studied the Bible have concluded that what Paul writes here was originally a hymn that was sung in the early church. So Paul quotes it here. It is considered one of the great passages in the New Testament. Here is Paul quoting these grand words to settle a church squabble. Is it overkill? Not at all. He sees that the way we get along together in the church is to reflect the very mind of Christ.

He begins with an introduction: Have the same mind among yourselves that you have in Christ Jesus. And then he quotes the hymn, which tells a little story:

Christ was in the form of God,
but he didn't consider being equal with God as something to hang onto.

Instead, he emptied himself, and took the form of a slave.
He took on human form, and humbled himself,
and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Because Christ did that, God has highly exalted him.
God has given him the name above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee in heaven and earth and among the dead will bow,
and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord

to the glory of God the Father.

Paul sings the song, or at least writes the words to the Philippians, so that they will see again who Jesus was. Jesus gave up his glory. He emptied himself. All the things that we use to show how important we are didn't matter to Jesus at all:

We put great stock in our educational degrees and the titles before our name: Doctor, Your Honor, Reverend, but Jesus cared not for these credentials at all.

We like casually to drop into conversations the names of important people we know, but Jesus spent most of his time associating with people we wouldn't name drop at all—lepers, prostitutes, the poor.

We like people to know how widely traveled we are, but Jesus never traveled more than 100 miles from Nazareth, and was even taken outside the city to be crucified.

The message we get in our world is certainly not to empty ourselves, but to fill ourselves—with credentials, with important people, with money, with status. The last thing we want to do is to give all of that up. And when it comes times to give it up, it's hard. President Dwight Eisenhower, our 33rd president, was a genial man. But even he said that at the end of his term, when he looked out the window of the White House and saw them constructing the inaugural platform for John Kennedy, his successor, it looked to Ike like they were constructing his gallows. We don't give up power easily or naturally.

But Paul sings a song about one who did it. He emptied himself. He took on human form. He became obedient unto death. And when we let the mind of Christ become our mind, it changes everything. Who can sing of the Christ who emptied himself, and still worry about being number one? Who can sing of Christ being a slave, and still want to be a master? Who can sing of the Christ who went to death on a cross, and still worry about getting what we deserve?

Paul's approach is a powerful one. He doesn't argue or persuade or compel. He simply sings a song that shows the humble Christ, and reminds the Philippians—and us—that it is this Jesus and no other who is our Lord.

So, says Paul, “have the same mind, be of full accord. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than you. Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” We have the same mind as that of Christ.

I was having a conversation some time ago with a friend, and we were talking about a third person, a much admired leader in the community. And my friend said: “The reason he is so effective as a leader is that he wants absolutely nothing for himself.” That is high praise indeed. Imagine—a person with no hidden agendas, no trying for a power grab, no pretending to be what he is not to get something from you. “He wants nothing for himself.”

When we speak of the humility of Christ, it is that that we have in mind. Not a groveling or low esteem. Rather, it is the absolute confidence that we belong to God, and so we don’t have to prove anything to anyone or grab for any power. We don’t always have to be right. We don’t always have to get our way. We don’t have to put others down in order to put ourselves on top. We can empty ourselves, humble ourselves, because that is what Jesus did, and Jesus is our Lord.

There is one more thing to wonder about with this passage and it is this: Why did the people who put together the lectionary pick this passage for Palm Sunday? This song in Philippians is the epistle text every year on Palm Sunday. Why this text?

It is surely because this is the week where the song in Philippians comes to its climax. To be sure, Jesus has lived in human form since his birth. He has already been living in humanity and humility. He has already emptied himself. But this week we will watch that emptying take place in new and terrible ways. In the garden as he prays he empties himself of getting his way with God—“not my will but yours be done.” Before Pilate he will empty himself of earthly power. He will empty himself of companionship as the disciples flee for their lives. He will empty himself of dignity as his garments are taken from him. He will empty himself finally of blood and breath and finally of life itself. When he enters Jerusalem on this day, that is where this week will end.

Is that the end? Paul says not. Paul sings of God exalting Jesus, of people bowing before Jesus, of calling Jesus Lord. That day will come, we know: Empty tomb, risen Lord. But we must go through the humility of Golgotha and the cross before we get there.

Seek not the empty glory of this world, friends. Seek instead the mind of Christ. †